

Message Text

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ACTION EA-14

INFO OCT-01 EUR-25 ISO-00 SCI-06 ACDA-19 NIC-01 SAJ-01

OMB-01 MC-02 NSF-04 IO-14 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-07 H-03

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FM AMEMBASSY CANBERRA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2918

INFO AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: MARR, PINR, AS, UR, US

SUBJECT: PROPOSAL FOR ESTABLISHMENT OF JOINT SOVIET-AUSTRALIAN
OPTICAL TRACKING STATION

REF: CANBERRA 1914

1. SUMMARY: PROPOSAL FOR ESTABLISHMENT OF JOINT SOVIET-AUSTRALIAN OPTICAL TRACKING STATION, LEAKED TO PRESS APR 1 (REFTEL) CONTINUES TO ATTRACT MAJOR ATTENTION. PRIME MINISTER WHITLAM ASKED TWO QUESTIONS ON ISSUE AT PRESS CONFERENCE APR 2, BUT CONFINED ANSWER TO OBSERVATION THAT MATTER UNDER STUDY AND NO HURRY ABOUT DECISION. LIBERAL OPPOSITION LEADER SNEDDEN HAS EXPRESSED STRONG OPPOSITION TO PROPOSAL. EDITORIALS IN SYDNEY MORNING HERALD AND AUSTRALIAN SIMILARLY OPPOSED. END SUMMARY.

2. PROPOSAL FOR ESTABLISHMENT OF JOINT SOVIET-AUSTRALIAN OPTICAL TRACKING STATION, WHICH DESCRIBED IN DETAIL IN SYDNEY MORNING HERALD APRIL 1 FOLLOWING LEAK FROM WITHIN AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT
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(REFTEL), CONTINUES TO ATTRACT MAJOR ATTENTION.

3. AT PRESS CONFERENCE APRIL 2 PRIME MINISTER WHITLAM WAS ASKED TO COMMENT ON PROPOSAL. HE REPLIED (ANSWER SLIGHTLY ABRIDGED) QTE YOU REFER TO THE PROPOSAL THAT SOME SOVIET SCIENTISTS MADE IN FEBRUARY FOR ESTABLISHMENT OF A JOINT AUSTRALIAN-SOVIET STATION. THE PROPOSAL IS THAT THE STATION WOULD BE USED FOR THE PURPOSES OF PHOTOGRAPHING SPACE OBJECTS AND CONTRIBUTING TO A STUDY OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ATMOSPHERE. THE PROPOSAL IS CURRENTLY UNDER STUDY IN APPROPRIATE DEPARTMENTS. NO ADVICE HAS BEEN GIVEN TO MINISTERS ON IT, AND MINISTERS HAVE NOT CONSIDERED IT. END QTE.

4. ASKED WHETHER CABINET WILL MAKE DECISION ON STATION AND WHEN SUCH DECISION MAY BE EXPECTED, WHITLAM REPLIED, QTE CABINET MIGHT, BUT IT MIGHTN'T. IT DEPENDS WHAT THE MINISTERS CONCERNED FEEL ABOUT IT. I WOULDN'T IMAGINE THERE'S ANY PARTICULAR HURRY. I BELIEVE THERE HAVE BEEN SUCH PROPOSALS PUT TO OUR PREDECESSORS, TOO. BUT, AS OFTEN HAPPENED IN THOSE DAYS, NO DECISION WAS REACHED. END QTE.

5. CANBERRA TIMES APRIL 2 REPORTS AUSTRALIAN SECURITY INTELLIGENCE ORGANIZATION (ASIO) HAD RECOMMENDED AGAINST ESTABLISHMENT OF JOINT STATION. MELBOURNE AGE HEADLINES ITS STORY, QTE GOVERNMENT CERTAIN TO REJECT SOVIET TRACKING STATION END QTE, WHILE PRO-GOVERNMENT AUSTRALIAN HEADLINES, QTE SOVIET UNION MAY BE ALLOWED TO SET UP A SCIENTIFIC BASE HERE END QTE. HOWEVER, AUSTRALIAN EDITORIALIZED THAT GOVERNMENT MUST REFUSE RUSSIAN REQUEST, ON GROUND THAT AUSTRALIA, IN SEEKING GREATER FREEDOM FROM U.S., DOES NOT WANT TO BECOME SATELLITE OF ANOTHER COUNTRY. SYDNEY MORNING HERALD, NORMALLY CRITICAL OF GOVERNMENT, COMMENTS EDITORIALY THAT IT SHOULD TAKE LITTLE TIME FOR GOVERNMENT TO CONSIDER SOVIET PROPOSAL, ONLY PROBLEM BEING HOW TO REFUSE PROPOSAL TACTFULLY.

6. LIBERAL OPPOSITION LEADER BILL SNEDDEN IN PRESS STATEMENT APRIL 1 SAID, QTE PRIME MINISTER SHOULD IMMEDIATELY REJECT SOVIET PROPOSAL FOR JOINT SCIENTIFIC BASE IN AUSTRALIA. IT IS NOT IN AUSTRALIA'S INTERESTS TO PROVIDE FACILITIES TO SOVIET UNION THAT WOULD PERMIT GATHERING OF SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL INFORMATION WHICH MAY BE OF STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE. END QTE.

7. COMMENT: ARTICLES IN PRESS AND PRESS QUESTIONS TO PRIME LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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MINISTER HAVE NOT SO FAR FOCUSSED ON IMPLICATIONS OF FACT THAT AMBASSADOR'S DISCUSSION OF ISSUE WITH DFA HAD LEAKED TO PRESS OR THAT AMBASSADOR WAS INFORMED OF PROPOSAL BY DFA AND WAS ASKED FOR U.S. COMMENTS. WHITLAM HAS CLEARLY AVOIDED DECISION FOR MOMENT, SINCE TIMING OF PRESS LEAK ON THIS MATTER IS NO DOUBT GREATLY EMBARRASSING FOR HIM, COMING AS IT DOES WHEN HE IS BEGINNING HIS PREPARATIONS FOR VISIT TO SOVIET UNION IN JUNE.

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